



THE RELEVANCE OF WRITING PRACTICE TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING

A RELEVÂNCIA DA PRÁTICA DE ESCRITA PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO DO PENSAMENTO CRÍTICO

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RESUMO

Existe uma tendência pedagógica colocada em prática desde meados da década de 80, momento em que o inglês comunicativo é adotado com mais vigor no Brasil, que enfatiza a habilidade oral contextualizada e a repetição de funções linguísticas. O principal objetivo deste método é o de desenvolver habilidades orais de comunicação fluente. Devido a essa tendência, a atividade da escrita tem sido muitas vezes um exercício pedido para ser realizado fora da sala de aula, ou relegada ao segundo plano do aprendizado de um idioma. Este artigo examina a importância da escrita, que não só é uma ferramenta extremamente útil para o aprendizado de um idioma, como também desenvolve o pensamento crítico do aluno. Discutimos algumas diferenças entre o escrever e o falar, a fim de oferecer sugestões de aplicação de exercícios escritos em sala de aula e, assim, contribuir para o desenvolvimento da escrita acadêmica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Habilidades de escrita. Aula de escrita. Atividades de redação. Modo oral e modo escrito.

ABSTRACT

There has been a pedagogical trend occurring since the middle of the 1980s, when communicative English is adopted with more vigor in Brazil, which emphasizes contextualized oral skills and the repetition of linguistic functions. The main objective of this method is to develop oral communication skills and fluency. Due to this tendency, writing activity has often been an exercise requested to be carried out outside the classroom, or relegated to the background of language learning. This article examines the importance of writing, which is not only an extremely useful tool for learning a language, but also develops the student's critical thinking. We also intend

to discuss some differences between writing and speaking, and offer suggestions for applying written drills in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: Writing skills. Writing class. Writing activities. Oral mode and written mode.

INTRODUCTION

When people are learning a language, why is it important to write it as well? Are there any differences between writing and speaking? What are the benefits of creative writing to the student? According to Bassnet (1993, p. 91) “in traditional teaching, the most neglected area of all is writing. Students are taught about reading and taught to revere the opinions of literary critics, but they are rarely taught to write anything except essays”.

This essay intends to shed some light on the topic of writing and discuss its importance for the learner of any language. Although oral fluency is the goal of most of the learners, we will try to show, based on some authors who write about language acquisition, language teaching and linguistics, like Biber and Hagbolt (1935), that writing is a different mode of the language. It is complex, according to Hillocks (2006, p. 01) because it involves the use of different types of knowledge:

knowledge of the content to be written about; procedural knowledge that enables the manipulation of content; knowledge of discourse structures, including the schemata underlying various types of writing (e.g., story, argument), syntactic forms, and the conventions of punctuation and usage; and the procedural knowledge that enables the production of a piece of writing of a particular type.

Therefore, learning how to write an idiom is as important as learning how to speak it. We will also propose that writing brings different benefits to the student other than those ones of speaking. Finally we shall discuss some approaches to teaching writing that might be useful for the teacher of English as a foreign language.

THE ORAL MODE X THE WRITTEN MODE

There has always been a discussion over the importance of the written mode of the language in comparison to the oral mode. Which mode, oral or written, should be considered “real language” and which one a person should be more trained for? This type of discussion has probably been going on since men began to write literary texts, speeches and lectures. Not only did the Greeks study and invent rhetoric and figures of speech, but were also concerned about the ability to persuade through the spoken word. In fact, it seems that both, the written and the spoken modality of the language, were equally studied by them. In Greece, a good speaker would carefully compose his text to later memorize it, in a way that its delivery would seem as natural as spoken language. That was the art of persuasion and oratory.

It may be a fact that the written mode of the language might have started to obtain more status, as the few texts that were not destroyed by time started to be collected and copied. Alexander, the Great built a library and in the Middle Ages religious, philosophical, literary and scientific texts started to be copied in different supports and stored, firstly by the church and then by the first universities. Soon after the invention of the press, books have become more and more accessible to the ordinary men, and started to be collected and purchased. This change might have brought about a decline in the perception of the oral language as being important. In the scientific nineteenth century, however, Biber (1991) explains that the idea of speech being considered a lower or less important mode of the language began to change when linguists as the brothers Grimm began to study speech in its own right. This bias can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century up to the present. Below there are some quotes by famous linguists:

Writing is ‘visual speech symbolism (SAPIR, 1921, p. 19-20); writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by visible marks (BLOOMFIELD, 1933p, 21); speech is fundamental and writing only a secondary derivative (HAL, 1964, p. 8-9); writing is a crude way of representing linguistic structure rather than a sign system with a direct relation to the world (POSTAL, 1966: 91, p.20); written communication is derivative of the face-to-face conversational norm (FILMMORE, 1981, p. 153); Aronoff notes ‘the undoubtedly correct observation that spoken language is ‘true’ language, while written language is an artifact (ARONOFF, *apud* BIBER, 1991, p. 6).

What can be observed, however, is that although the bias that speech is primary over writing has been extremely important in guiding research efforts within linguistics, it has not been widely accepted outside of linguistics. That seems true, especially when one considers how good schools insist on writing practice. Besides, when one wants to teach language accuracy or grammatical competence, one always relies on examples taken from literary texts. Online customized corpora composed by written language are also used as an efficient resource to write specific genres effectively. It provides bundles – “essentially extended collocations defined by their frequency of occurrence and breadth of use” (HYLAND, 2008, p. 8) that help make language sound natural. As Schuster *et al.* (2014) state, learning to use patterns will help “using the language and the style accepted by your research community” (p. 7).

A student of his or her native language usually has classes on composition or literature while speech classes are wrongly regarded as useless, since every native supposedly knows how to express himself or herself through the spoken language.

Generally speaking, there have been many linguistic studies of speech and writing, but there is little agreement on the salient characteristics of the two modes. Biber (1991) explains that there is disagreement and discussion over the general view that written language is a structurally complex elaborated, complex form and abstract, while spoken language is concrete, context-dependent, and structurally simple. According to the linguist, some studies have found almost no linguistic differences between speech and writing, while others actually claim that speech is more elaborated and complex than writing. Historically, academics have regarded writing, in particular literary works, as the true form of language, while speech has been considered to be unstable, degenerate and not worth studying. What happens is that students rarely are trained to master scientific writing. According to Schuster *et al.* (2003)’s experience in L2 writing courses, students present a combination of language barrier and lack of knowledge when developing a written text and cannot say whether this happens due to lack of English proficiency or poor organization of ideas.

In theory, writing is disregarded as secondary and derivative from speech. In practice, however, speech is also disregarded as unsystematic and not representative of the true linguistic structure of a language. In Biber’s opinion, this view is especially prominent within the generative-transformation list paradigm, where grammatical

intuitions are the primary data to be analyzed. Given the range of arguments on both sides of the issue, Biber tries to solve this question by arguing that “it might well be the case that neither speech nor writing is primary, that they are rather different systems, both deserving careful analysis” (BIBER, 1991, p.7). It seems that if they are different systems, it is because they are produced differently and follow different laws of composition.

Although Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) brought new modes of writing, i.e., speeches written to be spoken (MONTE MÓR; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2006) and motivation for people to write and develop digital literacies, much discussion have been going on about the positive and negative impacts of this new practice concerning written language (AMARAL, 2003; FASCIANI, 1998; KOMESU; TANANI, 2009). This article concentrates on the learning and practice of academic writing in a foreign language. Since this genre requires the mastering of systematic structures, logical order and reviewing competence, it may contribute to the development of other language skills due to the reflective thinking it demands.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WRITING AND SPEAKING

To a native speaker or to someone fluent in a second language, oral production is fast. The words, due to everyday practice, come out easily and flow steadily and naturally. Of course one may not know a particular preposition after a verb, or one might not possess a wide range of vocabulary, but these little problems do not really interfere in someone’s everyday communication. It seems that people with a good command of a given language talk among themselves easily and effortlessly, regardless of a rule that might be in a book.

Oral language is not devoid of internal rules, on the contrary, it has its own characteristics, but these features are internalized due to the simple immersion of the subject in the world and due to never ending practice. What is more, oral communication is not that broad. By saying that, we mean that even at work, school or among the family, one tends to repeat linguistic patterns (the book 1984, by George Orwell shows how some dictatorial governments, which use violence, mass media, and disregard education can simplify language to attain their social objectives and

keep in power). The fact is that one usually greets, asks simple questions, answers briefly, asks the time or says the same thing about a subject. Nowadays, there are people who simply spend a whole day without saying anything, or stating simple ideas, but communicating, nevertheless. Fluency, of course, does not come easily to a speaker. But how fluent one must be in order to perform the majority of tasks that our daily routine imposes on us?

Writing, however, is a whole different process. People usually write because something must be recorded, so, it must be important. According to Yde and Spolders (1990, p. 264) written language is used in situations where some kind of permanent record of facts, information or ideas are required. A written text enables readers to reflect on and refer back to the same text as frequently as they require. In written communication, writers construct a cognitive representation of meaning and produce texts to express that meaning for their readers. As Nystrand (*apud* YDE; SPOLDERS, 1990, p. 187) states: “Both readers and writers make sense - the one of print, the other in print.”

In the text meaning is seldom resolved in a single word or phrase, but mostly through longer structures that cross or intertwine the written text. These structures can only be understood when their elements are connected to one another. Connectedness is at the core of meaning. Consequently writers should have at their disposal a repertoire of linguistic clues to signal their readers this connectedness. Unfortunately, speaking to someone is not writing to someone. In writing, there is no body language, no helpful sound, no rephrasing, no starting over, and no apologizing. When one writes, one has to know exactly what one is doing with language. On closer examination we can notice important divergences between the spoken and the written mode and it is only in the elementary stages of study that the difference between spoken and written words and sentences is small. The farther we progress in the art of writing, the greater is the difference between both modalities of the language.

Grammatical intricacy is one of the distinguishing features of a text. As the texts become more spoken, the number of clauses increases and the relationship between these clauses becomes more intricate. This feature is typical of other spoken and written texts, that is, spoken texts are generally more grammatically intricate than

written ones. On the other hand, lexical density decreases as a text become more spoken. Halliday (1985, p. 64) calculates lexical density by icing the number of lexical items by the number of clauses in a text. Because of it cohesive structure, a written text has more lexical items per clause than a spoken one.

In a research on the production of written texts, opposed to the production of spoken ones, Rodriguez (2001) points out that there are two important differences between these two kinds of modality: the way and conditions each modality is produced. Besides, the way language is used in each kind of production (phonetic substance meant to be listened against graphic substance meant to be read), both modalities happen in different contexts. In the spoken mode, language is produced in a situation where there are two speakers who alternate roles and build meaning together, interacting in a face-to-face situation. When we communicate, there is a plethora of things to be used, in order to make ourselves get by: there is body language, mimic, different sounds, gestures and intonation that we, as well trained communicative animals, can produce instantly and most of the time unconsciously. When we speak, even if we make mistakes, the receptor of our message feels, if not at ease, some way connected to our train of thoughts. What is more, there is always the possibility of rephrasing a thought, pausing to think and starting all over again, erasing a bad “text” and beginning a new one. In the written modality, however, language is produced as a result of a solitary act: the writer doesn’t interact with his reader. He elaborates his text alone, without interruptions or signs transmitted by his interlocutor, what means that the text produced is the writer’s entire responsibility. Furthermore the writer has more time to think and organize ideas.

Therefore, the condition in which language is produced affects the way language is used. In the spoken mode, there is a tendency to a lack of planning and improvisation, whereas in the written text the opposite occurs. The oral text contains linguistic marks of its flexible and sometimes unpredictable construction, what leads to a more fragmented aspect and simplicity if one considers its syntactical organization. The oral text can always be changed as it is being produced. Context also plays an important role in the production of both kinds of texts. When we talk about our daily affairs, speakers are usually involved in the same context, or it is implicit.

Due to the detachment (or distance) between speaker and interlocutor, the written text needs to be better planned because it is essentially a monologue. As stated before, the writer cannot rely on body language or voice intonation to engage his interlocutor and the same idea must be conveyed to different readers, who sometimes have different backgrounds and who might be inserted in a different social context, time or place. Thus, in the written modality the text must be more complex and cohesive, what implies a different strategy that must be deployed by the writer, who cannot assume shared knowledge with a reader. More frequently writer and reader are unknown of each other. All complex or scientific texts must contain details of setting, participants, sequence of events, thesis and line of argument in order to be comprehensible to the reader.

A written text must create its own context for meaning, it must be independent of any context outside itself, in this sense it must be decontextualized. Moreover, in the production of a written text, there are no marks of continuous and on-going planning. Pauses, rephrasing or discourse markers are not used. If the producer of a written text wants to be understood by its reader he or she must apply linguistic strategies which sometimes are not necessarily present in the oral modality. The use of coordination and subordination is a must (the number and use of conjunctions and connectors will depend on the formality of the text) and punctuation. Rodriguez (2001) concludes that even if the same linguistic system is used, there are some basic rules for its employment that vary according to the modality chosen, what results in different products.

The research done by the author sheds some light in the discussion we propose. Sometimes, differences in grammatical intricacy, lexical density and nominalization that occur between oral and written texts are not absolute differences. In some contexts the distinctions become rather blurred. This is likely to occur for example in texts, which are written to be spoken. However, generally the functions and context in which oral and written language are used separately, and their linguistic realizations reflect this separation.

WHY TEACH WRITING? WHY WRITE?

One of the most obvious reasons to learn writing is that most of the countries in the world are literate societies and we live in a written culture. The transition to literacy seems to have had important consequences for individuals as well as societies, since it contributed to the spread of ideas and the development of science. Thus, writing is directly connected to power and status. It is a known fact that societies that do not have the written code are usually seen and treated as more primitive, poor, and detached from what people call the modern world. But the benefits of writing go beyond that and affect the way any individual thinks. Some researches have claimed that radically different thought processes are enabled by literacy, which can be seen as a technology that changes people's cognition. In particular, it has been claimed that abstract, decontextualized thought depends on literacy, so that, non-literate individuals tend to think only in concrete, contextualized ways. According to Murray (1973 *apud* JUDY, 1981, p. 188):

1. Writing is a skill which is important in school and after school.
2. Writing for many students is a skill, which can unlock the language arts. Students who have never read before often begin to read in the writing program. They have to read their own words to find out what they've said and decide how to say it more effectively.
3. Writing is thinking.
4. Writing is an ethical act, because the single most important quality in writing is honesty.
5. Writing is process of self-discovery.
6. Writing satisfies man's primitive hunger to communicate.
7. Writing is an art, and art is profound play.

When a teacher asks a text to be produced by his or her student, what he or she is trying to do is helping the student to develop an effective and easily functioning instrument of expression. A tool used not only for explaining or describing what one knows or imagine, but also probes one's mind and brings out "what otherwise may remain hidden and unproductive or dormant there, known but unrecognized and unidentified" (BILLOWS, 1961, p. 182). Therefore, writing is a tool to interpret the world and our experiences in it.

Composing creative texts provides an important way for people to sort through their experiences, to make sense of their world and to share their observations with

others. When students are deeply engaged in this process, it is often revealed in curiosity they have towards the language. Creative writing involves a writer successfully assimilating a personal experience and sharing it with another person. Therefore, in order to write, a person needs to learn about the *worlds* - their personal world and the public world:

Composition should open a channel through which daydreams become actualities. It should also provide for more earnest observation of things in life and a chance to discuss them. Clear and independent thinking is also important in composition (CROSS; CARNEY, 1939, p. 250).

We have to keep in mind that a language is a system of perceptible signs by which we can be conscious of what we have in mind. With language one can speculate about the human activity in time and space. The more complete our mastery of these systems of signs, the greater our power to learn, to think, to understand accurately, to imagine, to reason, and to act will be. Therefore, writing can also become a powerful instrument that helps develop the capacity for abstraction and conceptual activity.

Writing is also useful because it helps us to use the linguistic system in a different way, broadening its capacities by continuous planning. It is also an indispensable device in language learning because in order to write we must analyze each word phonetically and orthographically; we successively see each letter; we pronounce, read, and hear each word, phrase, and sentence. At the same time we supplement and reinforce this complex of activities by movements of the hand, what enhances our learning and cognition. "A piece of written language may well be ideal for teaching features of spoken mode, just as a piece of recorded spoken language may prove perfectly suitable for extracting features of written mode" (McCARTHY, CARTER, 1994, p.6).

WRITING TIPS AND THE FOREIGN STUDENT

There are some books that try to teach or discuss writing. Their opinions are extremely helpful and should serve as a guide to the teacher who wants to teach writing. In a very general way, any student should be trained, as it happens in the oral mode of the language, to express his thoughts, opinions and ideas by using the written mode. Students must know that writing, besides being formal discourse that can have

a pattern - like a complaining letter for example – can also be an exercise of experiencing thinking and imagining. Gurrey (1954) has an interesting approach to writing. His book is divided into fundamental principles, subsidiary principles, objectives and methods. According to the author the fundamental principles would be life experience of the student, purpose of writing, interest and aims to achieve the purpose.

The subsidiary principles would be: responsibility of the writer, confidence and practice. In “the methods”, Gurrey emphasizes the preparation stage, types of preparation and the subject. Judy thinks that “part of the problem of writing is solved by engaging the students in writing that is truly personal and creative, and it is aided further by offering students a wide range of ways of expressing those ideas (JUDY, 1981, p. 195) because “unless composing is real and personal, it is aimless, and people learn nothing from it” (p. 188).

So far, we have dealt with theories applied and verified in a different context: students and learners who have moved definitely to the target language country or are fluent in the target language. We wonder what happens in writing sessions in foreign countries. Our experience with English institutes is that they usually regard writing as an exercise that should be made at home, without or with very little teacher guidance. It is supposed that once the student learns the syntax of the language and some vocabulary, which was taught from a “communicative” perspective, he or she will be able to produce a written text. Some teachers have a list of possible titles and suggestions at hand, so it is easier to throw those to the students and make them deal with the task. The process of learning how to write is as personal or as demanding or as time consuming one as the process of learning how to speak. We have seen above that the written modality requires other kind of strategies and these strategies can also help the student in his oral performance.

If we talk about students who work and still find some little time to study English, we will realize that just a few of them really write anything. They might read the target language in class or at work, but writing is always avoided or discarded. Writing is a careful exercise, which demands concentration and patience. For the average adult student, for example, who has a family to support and a job to keep and is always

overworked, there is hardly any time to study, let alone sit and write. Now that we have seen some differences between the spoken and the written language, and its importance for the learning process, it is important to discuss the learning of it by foreign students. We would like to comment on some ideas, which caught our attention and can be applied to Brazilian students who don't have time to study or write at home.

CLASSROOM WRITING

In a structural point of view, learning to write effectively implies learning to order a series of sentences, linked by common properties to form an integrated whole. Consequently, learning to write implies learning to handle cohesive devices appropriately. A cohesive tie is a semantic relation between an element in a text and some antecedent that is crucial to its interpretation. Nevertheless, writing should also be seen as something dynamic and flexible. It would be purposeless to teach only connectors and conjunctions. Written texts can also be simple and still beautiful. The whole literature proves that.

There are many ways to make a student write in the classroom. There can be passive or active exercises. Among the passive exercises, a teacher can ask the student to copy something from any kind of book (not only literature but also grammar) or dictate words, sentences, letters or stories. The active mode implies that the student will produce a text using his own ideas.

The idea that boys and girls learn to write by writing is as old-fashioned as a kerosene lamp. Not only it is outmoded but, because it is a half-truth, it is a vicious theory for anyone to accept wholly. Its complete acceptance leads too often to assignments in which the pupil is asked to write about unfamiliar things, and at any length, and in any way that he pleases (CROSS; CARNEY, 1939, p. 246).

In a cognitive point of view, you don't need to stress the students by asking a great number of compositions to be made and neither should the student write about everything. Building confidence and a sense of pleasure is more important than any "challenging topic" a teacher may devise for his or her student. Working with the improvement of only one composition a month, for example, is good exercise to raise the students' awareness: "Fewer long compositions and more short ones done in the

classroom under the teacher's supervision will accomplish much toward realizing accuracy and correctness" (CROSS; CARNEY, 1939, p.c247).

If students do not have time to write at home, the teacher can help them more than he or she might at first realize by seeing that composition writing is, from the beginning, a social and co-operative affair. Differently from what most of the English institutes think, "the making of pieces of writing is a craft or skill that is appropriately carried out in a workshop atmosphere, with a workshop type of self-discipline" (BILLOWS, 1961, p. 186). After the text being produced, the help and criticism of others, and reflection in their presence, or in the light of their reactions can be very valuable for the learner.

If teachers wish the whole class to write a composition on a particular subject they must prepare them in two ways: by making sure that all members of the class have enough ideas on the subject to form the bases of a successful piece of writing, and they have the linguistic equipment to deal with the material. Therefore, the architecture or planning of a piece of writing is often as important as the actual writing itself: "If the various points follow one another in a logical order in such a way that each point grows out of and strengthens or supports the one before it, the cumulative power of the whole piece may be very much greater than that any single element in it (BILLOWS, 1961, p. 205). According to Billows, the foundations of good written composition are laid in:

oral composition exercises and continuous narration; the writing of composition exercise; the completing of passages, whether copied or written down from dictation, or composed co-operatively on the blackboard and then copied; the narration, discussion and writing down from memory of stories told in class and reports, descriptions, etc; the by-products of the preparation of advance texts, in collating and narration of material gathered from direct experiences, interviewing, research work in libraries and discussion.

In our opinion, English institutes should program some hours a month of classroom writing practice. These classes could be divided into: warm-up and lead-in, where students would discuss a topic orally; sample text reading; collection of vocabulary from the text and vocabulary building and finally the writing of the text. The

composition made by the student does not have to be long. The basic student could start writing a sentence or a paragraph. Cross and Carney (1939, p. 249) state that writing “is a process of ideas, sentences, mechanics of English, paragraphs, built into the whole structure for accuracy and correctness”. Peyton (1990), on researching Journal Writing, gives a good deal of importance to paragraph writing. She claims that if a good text is a collection of good paragraphs:

Teachers have a powerful tool for describing and modeling paragraph development for their students. [...] The awareness that students can produce coherent, organized text even if they have not yet mastered surface linguistic markers is important for teachers as they attempt to help students develop their writing abilities. This awareness is also important for students themselves (PEYTON, 1990, p. 135).

Cross and Carney (1939, p. 249) explain that “teachers have found that requiring the short composition, the paragraph, gives them a chance to see the papers being constructed and to teach as the writing goes on”. Therefore, we sustain that longer and more complex texts could be asked of advanced students. Basic and intermediate students would make short active and passive exercises, would have classes on punctuation and reading short stories, lyrics and poems would be a must. All these exercises should be carried out in the classroom.

Final Remarks

We tried to develop an essay where it should be discussed that writing is a different mode of the same language and, therefore, it is as important as speaking. A person who does not write well or satisfactorily actually does not know an important modality of a language. Writing, as speaking, is excellent training and can develop the awareness and the curiosity of the student. Language schools should be aware that writing is also communication and empowerment of the individual, and must be used as a powerful learning tool.

Although this is a known fact, it seems that English institutes are reluctant to promote more writing in their classrooms. It seems that the “communicative approach”,

the computer based exercise, the lack of libraries, the short amount of hours per semester and the lack of teachers trained or motivated to correct texts have created a situation where there has been less and less writing.

Schools that fail to see that and disregard writing are neglecting an important aspect of a language and a very important process of our civilization. Writing can be a delightful experience if one is taught to find his or her own way of expression. It is therapeutic and can be used as a tool for healing, power and change, because it makes the subject use language in a different way, and therefore obliges people to see reality in a different way.

Nevertheless, writing shouldn't be something unaided or classroom filler. On the contrary, it is a kind of exercise, which requires the presence and the attention of the teacher and must be taught as any other skill. Unfortunately, it is not what happens in reality. Schools don't train the teacher for this kind of activity and don't offer extra time for the student to develop this important skill in the classroom. In addition to that, some teachers tend to avoid writing tasks since correcting texts produced by unprepared students is a troublesome and arduous activity.

A lot of writing can be done in the classroom, though, and peer correction can be applied. A writing class can be as fun as a communicative class and can be divided into various parts. Student will only profit from this activity and might have their interests aroused concerning different forms of texts: newspapers, books, poems or plays. Moreover, through writing, students will practice another important mode of the language and will probably communicate better and with more accuracy, imagination and will be able to really expose their inner ideas.

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